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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: HUGE SHIA ARBA'EEN COMMEMORATION REFLECTS
IMPROVING SECURITY AND SECTARIAN ATMOSPHERE

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: As many as several million Iraqi and foreign Shia pilgrims converged on the central Iraq city of Karbala February 26-29 to mark the end of the symbolic forty-day "Arba'een" commemoration to honor the seventh-century death of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who is entombed in a Karbala shrine. Local contacts report that this year's event was probably the largest since Saddam's 2003 ouster, and they cite as explanatory factors a widespread public perception that the security situation is improving coupled with growing public confidence in the ability of GOI security forces to ensure pilgrim safety. Contacts also point to this year's relatively low number of attacks by AQI and other Sunni groups on Arba'een pilgrims as evidence of warming Sunni-Shia relations, a marked contrast to the 2006 and 2007 Arba'een commemorations that witnessed low turn-out and high sectarian violence. While Arba'een violence did occur - a suicide bombing attributed to AQI killed more than 40 pilgrims - attacks in the general area of pilgrim traffic were down 65 percent from 2007 and were comparable to 2005 levels. We see this year's large and relatively peaceful Arba'een commemoration as another point on Iraq's trendline of improving security, growing GOI capacity in maintaining public order, and slowly-thawing sectarian relations. End Summary.

Shia Throngs Converge on Karbala

¶2. (C) Shia pilgrims gathered in the central Iraq city of Karbala February 26-29 to mark the end of a symbolic forty-day (Arba'een means forty in Arabic) mourning period held annually to honor the seventh-century death of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed in a battle near Karbala and entombed in a gold-domed shrine that stands as one of Shia Islam's most sacred sites. Arba'een is a solemn, emotion-laden event in which Shia reflect on the pain of Hussein's lonely death at the hands of a vastly superior army, and they experience (some would say exaggerate) a sense of collective guilt and remorse that Hussein had been left to his grim fate by all but a small circle of 72 supporters, who can aptly be described as the original Shia. Some Shia express this latter emotion through various forms of ritual self-flagellation: in hours of extended live coverage of the commemoration (which was banned during the Saddam Hussein era), Iraqi state television repeatedly showed groups of men scourging themselves in rhythmic unison with lengths of chain or leather, and black-clad women striking and clawing at their own faces to express sorrow. In order to symbolically replicate some of Hussein's hardships and obtain increased divine blessing for their "ziarah" (minor Shia pilgrimage), many pilgrims march at least part of the way to Karbala, which is about 50 miles or a one- or two-day journey by foot from Baghdad and a 10-12 day walk from Basrah.

13. (C) GOI authorities claim that 9 million pilgrims (including an estimated 80,000 foreign visitors, mostly from Iran and Gulf states) passed through the shrine complex last week, but Zuhair Hamoudi, a senior advisor to Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi, told us that the real number was probably closer to 4 million. A Sunni CoR Member was even less charitable in his estimate, asserting to us that Shia leaders are attempting to inflate crowd size in Karbala, which he claimed to be one million or less, in order to perpetuate with the USG the unsubstantiated belief that Shia outnumber the Sunni, who in fact comprise 40 percent of Iraq's population. Estimate inflation aside, Shia contacts agree that this year's commemoration was probably the largest since Saddam's 2003 ouster and that far more pilgrims traveled on foot this year than ever before. While they cited various reasons for this phenomenon (for example, commemoration timing coincided with Iraq's public school mid-term break), the major factors are a widespread public perception that the security situation is improving coupled with growing public confidence in the ability of GOI security forces to ensure pilgrim safety. For example, Shia Fadhila Party CoR member Bassim al-Sharif told us that many pilgrims marched to show that Iraqis are taking back their streets from terrorists and are no longer afraid. Ahmed al-Rifai, who accompanied his boss Vice President Adel as he greeted and mingled with pilgrims at the Hussein shrine, said Adel and other GOI leaders were surprised and gratified by the huge turnout, which they see as a clear affirmation of Iraq's improving security situation.

2008 Bigger, Better, Safer Than 2006 and 2007

14. (C) Contacts also cite this year's relatively low number of attacks by AQI and other Sunni groups on Shia pilgrims in transit to the commemoration as promising evidence of warming Sunni-Shia relations. This situation is in marked contrast to 2006 and 2007, when Arba'een participation was reduced due to significant sectarian tension and violence. According to Haitham al-Husseini, senior aide to ISCI chairman Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, numerous Baghdad pilgrims reported that they were offered food, water, and hospitality as they marched through Sunni-majority neighborhoods in Baghdad and in Sunni areas of towns along the Baghdad-Karbala highway such as Iskandariyah and Mahmoudiyah, two of the apexes of the so-called "Triangle of Death," a mixed Sunni-Shia area that has witnessed considerable sectarian mayhem in recent years. Haitham maintained that large-scale Shia marching through Sunni-majority areas - much less Sunni hospitality to such marchers - was unthinkable in 2006 and 2007 but is now part of Iraq's evolving reality.

15. (C) Statistics bear out the anecdotal reports. While a suicide bombing attributed to AQI killed 40 pilgrims at an Iskandariyah pilgrim rest station, there were no other major attacks during the commemoration period. Overall, attacks in Baghdad Security Districts and elsewhere in the general area of pilgrim traffic were down 65 percent from the 2007 Arba'een and comparable to 2005 figures. ISCI's Haitham and Fadhila's Bassim remarked that this reflects not only reduced sectarian tension but also greater GOI competence in maintaining security for such a large and operationally complex event. The GOI reportedly deployed 50,000 security personnel to protect the shrine area and access routes, and wisely imposed a ban on vehicular traffic in densely crowded areas to safeguard against vehicle-borne explosives.

16. (C) Just back from medical tests in London, Prime Minister Maliki delivered an upbeat, nationally-televised speech on the margins of the commemoration in which he praised Iraqis for "standing together to ward off the specter of civil war" and resist "the spirit of sectarianism that aims to dismember Iraqi society." Urging continued efforts at all levels of society in promoting national unity and reconciliation, which he seemed to suggest had already been largely achieved, Maliki praised GOI security forces. He declared 2008 as "the

year of services and development" and vowed to crack down on state corruption. In addition to Maliki and VP Adel, most other Shia political heavyweights were in attendance, though ISCI chairman Abdel Aziz al-Hakim did not participate due to ill health. His absence may also have been calculated to provide additional limelight to his son and heir apparent Amar al-Hakim, who continued his campaign to establish himself as a future national leader by delivering a speech in which he called upon the Shia masses to support formation of a Shia-majority region and participate in upcoming provincial elections, and upon the GOI to improve delivery of public services. Muqtada al-Sadr, whose armed minions attempted without success to seize the sacred Hussein shrine last August, was reportedly absent.

Comment

17. (C) While we do not subscribe to the almost Panglossian tone of Maliki's commemoration speech, we do see this year's large and relatively peaceful Arba'een commemoration as yet another positive point on a larger trendline of improving security, growing GOI capacity in maintaining public order, and thawing Sunni-Shia relations (though the Sunni CoR member's less-than-playful quibbling with Arba'een numbers is indicative of deep-rooted distrust and lingering suspicion between the groups). The degree of popular participation and display of raw emotions during the commemoration serve as reminders of the enduring and visceral force of religion among Iraqi Shia. It remains to be seen whether nominally religious-based parties such as ISCI, Dawa, Fadhila, and the Sadrist Trend will be able to tap into and exploit this force in future provincial elections.

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